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Thanksgiving Is Not Just Another Day: The Health of Gratitude

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Your Life Your Health

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Few things are as fundamental to good health as gratitude expressed in thanksgiving. In Scripture the story is told of ten men who were healed of a dreaded disease when they expressed faith by following instructions given to them. Yet, only one of the ten felt gratitude and turned and gave the Lord thanksgiving for health. No matter whom you are and no matter what your health or condition, you have much for which to be thankful today. Your health will improve simply by discovering what you have to be thankful for and by your expressing your gratitude to others.

Often my family traveled to celebrate thanksgiving elderly parents, now deceased. We traveled roads whose very curves and hills bring joyful memories, each of which evokes in us gratitude. We would laugh and hug one another. Great-grandmother, grandmother, mother all rolled into one were celebrated for continuing the traditions of dumplings and pecan pie. Great-grandfather, grandfather and father gone for ten years will be loved and remembered, bringing both joy and sadness, both borne of gratitude.

On this day, we will hold hands and for the 50th time sing, *America the Beautiful*. We will be grateful for this great, wonderful and noble nation. The words which Katharine Lee Bates penned in 1893 and refined until the final version was published in 1913, is our thanksgiving anthem. The words echo daily in my mind:

“O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

”O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern, impassioned stress

A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness!
America! America!
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

”O beautiful for heroes proved In liberating strife.
Who more than self the country loved
And mercy more than life!
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness
And every gain divine!...”

Whether native born, naturalized citizen, or permanent guest, everyone who breathes the air of freedom and opportunity which permeates this great land, owes a debt of gratitude to those who made this freedom possible with their commitment and sacrifice. Our family is particularly mindful of this requirement for gratitude as we have a grandson who is serving in the United States Army and who will not be with us physically for Thanksgiving for the second year.

Today, my gratitude naturally flows from the heart of one who knows he has been:

- Blessed with more than he deserves,
- Given opportunities which he did not earn
- More successful than his abilities and efforts warrant
- Given a family which is straight out of a story book
- Given friends who add value to life
- Given by God the privilege of living in the greatest country in the world
- Given a life which demands gratitude and thanksgiving

In the same way, gratitude comes from a heart of humility; pride engenders demanding and ingratitude. The reality is that part of a healthy life is a grateful heart and at the root of much illness can be found pride, arrogance and bitterness. We have a choice; we can choose gratitude and life or bitterness and death. The choice is not a product of what we have, but of our heart.

Families Who Grieve on Thanksgiving Day

I am grateful for my country today as I remember the evocative words which I first heard in the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, but since have virtually memorized; words with which President Abraham Lincoln consoled a mother with a nation’s gratitude. He said:

“Dear Madam, I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant-General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who

have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. (Letter to Mrs. Bixby, November 21, 1864)”

The records would subsequently be corrected as Mrs. Bixby had only two sons but lost them both, but that error neither changes her sacrifice nor the President’s sentiment. My personal gratitude and grief for those who have been lost is not conditioned upon any judgment of the conflict in which they died. It is only measured by the inestimable value of each human life which has been sacrificed and for the heartache of the parents, children and friends of each person who has died in service to this country. I could wish that each family could have been written, or could take as their own, the words quoted above, for these words imbues their loss with nobility and praise.

Gratitude and Health

Can a grateful heart enhance your health? A growing body of research says, "Yes". Gratitude, as a conscious practice, offers a whole host of health benefits.

In the dark days of winter, surrounded by all the holiday hustle and bustle, we may feel out of sync with the merriment, and gratitude may seem elusive. Perhaps we believe our holidays are not so much like Norman Rockwell's perfection but more like the Simpson's chaos. In fact, in a small research study, only ten percent of American adults reported experiencing the emotion of gratitude "regularly and often" - so we have lots of gloomy company. The good news is we can give ourselves the joy we think others have by developing a practice of gratitude.

Why gratitude? A series of studies show gratitude promotes physical and emotional well-being, improves one's ability to cope with stress and bolsters positive interaction with others. Furthermore, research shows grateful individuals report having more energy and less physical complaints than their non-grateful counterparts! Positive emotions enhance heart health by interrupting the stress response caused by negative emotions. In short, the practice of gratitude offers a method for a more harmonious life.

Choosing Gratitude

So, how do we choose gratitude? And, is it ok to “fake it”? Yes, because our emotions follow our thoughts; we can "act as if" we feel gratitude by concentrating our thoughts on things we are truly grateful for. In time, the real feeling of gratitude will follow. Our heart and our head will be in sync. As days turn into months, a shift in our thinking will occur, leaving us more peace-filled and content because we are focusing on the goodness in our life. And, typically, what we focus on becomes our reality.